

*Topographies of Trauma: Constellations of the  
Corporeal and the Architectural in  
Representations of 9/11*

**THESIS STATEMENTS**

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# **Topographies of Trauma: Constellations of the Corporeal and the Architectural in Representations of 9/11**

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## **THESIS STATEMENTS**

### **I. Topics and Objectives**

In my dissertation I explore constellations of the corporeal and the architectural within the context of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the ruins of the World Trade Center towers bodily remains became inseparable from architectural debris, making it virtually impossible to give proper burials to most of the victims. The general outrage over the publication of photographs depicting the carnage and other evidence of death—particularly of those that chose to jump out of the burning buildings—almost immediately led to the collective tabooing of such images. Apart from the obvious reasons of reverence and decorum that lie behind the public indignation, these photos also exhibit a particular juxtaposition of body and building which is reflected by the materiality of the ruins as well. Unlike many of the iconic representations of the catastrophe that make the crumbling towers stand in for the victims that perished in them, the mingling of human and architectural remains in the ruins and the tabooed photographs foreclose the possibility of the metaphoric substitution of the body by the building. Instead, they present body and building as contiguous, standing *next to*, rather than *for* each other. This metonymic relation is further complicated by the fact that the ruins contained not only corporeal and architectural remains but those of the terrorists as well. Correspondingly, the horrific act of the people who came to be known as “jumpers” or 9/11’s “falling bodies” evokes suicide—controversial as it is in the context of the terrorist attacks. Therefore, the body-building configurations that I explore in my dissertation are such that are not only uncontainable by the heroic narratives woven around the events of the day but they also reveal the constructed nature of the narratives devised to keep them at bay.

Over the past ten years a great many artistic representations of 9/11 have addressed subversive and tabooed constellations of body and building as one of the most problematic aspects of the trauma inflicted by the terrorist attacks. In the first two chapters of my dissertation I explore various manifestations of these constellations, while I dedicate the other two chapters to examining their artistic representations, both textual and visual. In sum, besides mapping subversive relations of the corporeal and the architectural in the context of 9/11, my main objective in this project was to trace their reverberations in art.

## II. Structure and Methods

The theoretical grounding of my arguments is primarily rooted in trauma theory and Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia. Buttressed by the achievements of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, trauma theory has been providing an indispensable tool for a number of scholars to examine the effects of 9/11 on American society. In my dissertation I trace trauma in the unsettling juxtapositions of body and building and apply the notion of heterotopia as a tool to demonstrate the mechanics of these juxtapositions. Foucault defines heterotopia in his essay "Of Other Spaces," as well in the preface of his voluminous work *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. In the former, he describes heterotopias as spaces in which multiple, mutually incompatible spaces are concentrated, while in the latter, heterotopia appears as an indicator of the constructedness of the discursive schemes of language and thought. The two approaches are, of course, closely intertwined insofar as heterotopia brings into conflict and destabilizes schemes of significations reiterated through cultural practices. The hasty removal of the ruins from Ground Zero, as well as the tabooing of the photographs of the jumpers are illustrative of heterotopic juxtapositions of body and building which yields further insights into the relationship between trauma and taboo as well. The theoretical apparatus applied to the individual chapters of the dissertation dovetails with the overall framework schemed up in the introduction. In what follows, I will outline the dominant lines of argumentation in each of the chapters.

The **introduction** delineates the concept of heterotopia by way of discussing the way humans' identify with the built environment that serves as a background to their everyday lives. Drawing on the findings of phenomenology, performativity, and cognitive linguistics, I demonstrate that the appropriation of built space as home can be described in terms of the dialectical processes of *anthropomorphization* and *architecturalization*. To demonstrate the operation of these processes in the context of 9/11 cognitive linguist George Lakoff and architectural theorist Neil Leach emulate cases in which onlookers felt physical pain upon witnessing the sight of the collapsing towers. While such instances may demonstrate the somatic ramifications of the metaphoric exchange that underpins the body's identification with the building, the ruins, the dust emanating from Ground Zero, and the tabooed photographs undermine the possibility of such metaphoric substitutions. Instead, the heterotopic constellations that I explore in my dissertation are to be found *in between* the source and target domains of the metaphor. In Foucault's terms, such a relationship between

body and building is predicated on (metonymic) *similitude* rather than (metaphoric) *resemblance*.

The **first chapter** is dedicated to the analysis of Richard Drew's "Falling Man," a photograph which, due to the outrage that it incited, became tabooed immediately upon its first appearance in newspapers the day after the catastrophe. The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that Drew's image constitutes a multi-layered heterotopia marked by the collisions of mutually exclusive narrative schemes instantiated by the relationships of body and building. After contextualizing the photo within the framework of the role of photography on 9/11, I employ Walter Benjamin's notion of the *optical unconscious*, Roland Barthes's terms *studium* and *punctum*, and Jacques Derrida's reading of Barthes's *Camera Lucida* to unravel conflicting layers of signification within the iconography of the photograph. I demonstrate these juxtapositions by distinguishing three levels of heterotopia: First, the image's content (signifying death in what Barthes describes as an "anterior future") is incompatible with its aesthetic qualities (symmetrical composition, alignment of body and building). Second, the title "Falling Man" is similarly problematic. While the term "falling man" euphemistically leaves the cause of falling unmarked, "jumper," the other term available for use denotes intention and evokes the connotation of suicide (which, in the context of 9/11, pertains exclusively to the act of the terrorists). The result is a crisis of signification in which the two terms mutually deconstruct each other, exposing the discursive schemes that are enacted by their use. 3. Third, I trace heterotopic constellations of the corporeal and the architectural in the pictorial dimension of the image. Unlike the well-known images of 9/11 that show the burning and collapsing buildings, Drew's photograph renders the towers' façade a holographic background, offering nothing but the falling body as a "fixed" point of reference, constituting the inverse of Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man."

Following my "close reading" of the photograph, I proceed to discuss the efforts of two journalists to identify the man in the photograph. First, I offer a reading of Peter Cheney's article which applies tropes of the "rags to riches" narrative to contextualize the man in the image. Second, I turn to Tom Junod's narrative which constructs the man as an unknown soldier and the photograph as his cenotaph. I argue that these journalistic constructions showcase particular modes of spectatorship—on one hand instigating readers to bear witness to the tabooed photograph, and on the other making the act of witnessing bearable by inscribing it with identity-constructions. Insofar as the photograph is an *agent* of disturbance, I demonstrate that the efforts to identify the man in it can be analyzed as performative acts of divesting the image of its agent-position. Finally, I conclude the chapter

with the discussion of Kevin Ackerman's short film entitled *The Falling Man* which pits Cheney and Junod's narratives against each other and reinstates the Falling Man as a "spectral body."

The **second chapter** deals with the materiality of the towers' ruins. The theoretical background of the chapter is defined by Georg Simmel and Rose Macaulay's theories of the romantic ruin, Dylan Trigg and Tim Edensor's recent phenomenological approaches to modern ruins, as well as Andreas Huyssen and Svetlana Boym's investigations of the relationship between ruins and nostalgia. As my point of departure, I problematize the inseparable unity of body (value) and building (waste) in the debris of the towers and trace manifestations of this unity in the so-called "missing posters" that proliferated all over New York after the catastrophe. Then, I proceed to examine conflicting views on the preservation of the arcaded entrances to the towers whose grid-like structures remained standing for weeks after the attacks. After contextualizing the discursive patterns that underpin the arguments for preservation versus obliteration, I discuss how photographic representations *construct* the ruins of the World Trade Center by making them conform to aestheticizing and jingoistic narratives which I explore in respective subchapters.

The last subchapter problematizes the afterlife of the ruins. By extension of Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image" I introduce three ships as case studies, each emblemizing the ruins in particular ways. The first was unearthed accidentally as an 18<sup>th</sup> century archeological find in Ground Zero, the second, the Turkish *Osman Mete*, was responsible for shipping the ruins overseas, and the third, the USS *New York*, contains steel from the WTC in her bow stem. Beyond its archeological relevance the 18<sup>th</sup> century vessel, particularly the numerous shoes that have been recovered from her hull, evokes the unsettling corporeality of the ruins of the towers. The Navy's new battleship inscribes the ruins into the narrative of war and transforms death into military sacrifice. The *Osman Mete*, on the other hand, illustrates the role of global commerce in which the architectural debris of the towers (and not the human remains) constitutes value. Through the "trialectical" relationship of the three ships I explore heterotopic constellations of body and building, value and waste.

The **third chapter** examines literary representations of heterotopia through Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. DeLillo's novel is one of the most famous novels addressing 9/11 to date, while *Specimen Days*, with only one of its three parts referencing Ground Zero, is mentioned only marginally, if at all, in critical discourse on 9/11 literature. In Cunningham's novel the ruins and the falling bodies appear as emphatic absences forming a void within the multilayered palimpsest of recurring images that pervade

the three interlocking stories of the novel. 9/11's tabooed memories are mirrored by other events involving other buildings that surface in the convoluted network of intra- and intertextual references. I scrutinize these references by using Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction. The recurring motifs of reading and interpreting offer the key to deciphering heterotopia as an emphatic absence.

If Cunningham's novel operates by absence, DeLillo's *Falling Man* operates by suspense. In the novel, New York's public spaces are transformed into sites of traumatic reenactment as a performance artist comes to mimic the pose of the man in Drew's photograph. The suppressed trauma that the performance brings to the fore recurs in the motif "organic shrapnel" which, besides evoking the original, medical meaning of heterotopia, recurs in multiple forms throughout the novel. The unsettling juxtapositions of body and building, victim and terrorist are also palpable in the novel's fragmented language, the accumulation of pronouns whose referents are difficult to identify. Both novels, as I argue throughout the chapter, dovetail in their effort to undermine redeeming narratives of trauma.

The **fourth chapter** focuses on visual representations, dealing with performance art, film, and architecture in respective subchapters. In the first, I examine Kerry Skarbakka's *photographic performances* which consist of series of retouched photographs of his performances. As a case study, I examine the series entitled *Life Goes On* which evolved out of a scandalous performance which reminded many onlookers of the 9/11 jumpers. Similarly to the unsettling performances of the artist in DeLillo's novel, Skarbakka's controversial performance transformed public space into a site of counter-memory, which I explore at length by reiterating the theories of Amelia Jones and Philip Auslander, among others.

In the second subchapter I deal with the documentary *Man on Wire* which pays homage to French tightrope walker Philippe Petit's legendary walk between the Twin Towers in 1974. There is no mention of the terrorist attacks in the film—an absence which most critics recognized as a nostalgic gesture towards a pre-9/11 New York. In an attempt to contest these readings, I argue that 9/11's absence from the film is such that evokes its uncanny *presence* evoked by the movie's representation of Petit's breathtaking performance in the dizzy heights. The photographs that document his walk exhibit constellations of body and building that poignantly recall the dilemmatic nature of intentionality behind the fatal act of the 9/11 jumpers. The documentary also features ample original footage of the towers' construction in which the fitting of the steel columns into their places uncannily resonate with familiar images of the towers' ruins where similar columns are exposed. By introducing

Robert Smithson's concept of *ruins in reverse* I foreground the implicitness of the ruins in the use of archival footage in the film's mise-en-scene.

In the last subchapter I extend the concept of *ruins in reverse* to the ongoing constructions at Ground Zero. Using Daniel Libeskind's winning master plan for the rebuilding of Ground Zero as a point of departure I explore the spatiality of the site along a vertical and a horizontal axis. The vertical axis is defined by the memorial (which marks the footprints of the towers as negative spaces) and the new skyscraper still under construction. The horizontal axis starts from the concrete base of the new tower (intended to protect the building from potential car bombs) and leads to the deconstructivist building of the 9/11 museum wedged between the negative spaces of the memorial. Diverging from Libeskind's original idea, the memorial and the tower are built in a minimalist style which, I argue, transforms the upward trajectory from negative to positive space into entropy as the uniformly minimalist texture of the structures along the vertical axis intersects with those along the horizontal one. While the museum evokes the Twin Towers' ruins in a deconstructivist vocabulary, the bombproof concrete podium attests to the architecture of post-9/11 paranoia inscribed into the foundations of the new tower. To unravel this interrelation I introduce the term *virtual ruin*.

### III. Conclusions

My dissertation aims to contribute to the ever-expanding field of 9/11 research by offering new perspectives on the intersections of space, trauma, and taboo. The main conclusions of my work can be subsumed under the following points:

1. Through the examination of the ways humans identify with the built environment it has become clear that there is an aspect of trauma caused by the 9/11 attacks which manifests itself in the collapse of the metaphoric model of architectural identifications.
2. Consequently, my purpose was not simply to identify manifestations of trauma in the daunting loss of human lives and the destruction of landmark buildings *per se* but in the very *method* of that loss, that is, in the subversive constellations of the corporeal and the architectural.
3. Through the examination of the materiality of the towers' ruins and the tabooed images of the falling bodies, the collapse of the metaphoric model of architectural identifications yielded new insights into the relationship between trauma and taboo.

4. The Foucauldian notion of heterotopia has been useful to describe the unsettling juxtapositions of body and building, victim and terrorist.
5. It has also become evident that a fair number of artistic representations address these juxtapositions as one of 9/11's suppressed traumas. By using heterotopia as a theoretical frame it is possible to examine artistic techniques that uncover these taboos in various configurations.

#### **IV. Directions for Future Research**

Although ten years have passed since the tragedy of September 11, it still constitutes one of the most recent cultural traumas in American history. Even if the memorial has opened temporarily for this year's commemorations of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, the completion of all the buildings planned for Ground Zero is yet to be seen. The last subchapter of my dissertation, in which I explore the ongoing projects at the site may serve as a springboard for future research into the museum and the new tower as "lived spaces."

The relationship between taboo and memory in the context of 9/11 seems to be undergoing significant changes. Drew's infamous photograph, which I address in the first chapter of my work, has emerged as a central motif in a large number of recent artworks. Although Tom Junod's 2003 *Esquire Magazine* article undoubtedly contributed to the reintroduction of the photograph into public discourse, it was not until the release of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* that artistic interest (primarily in the field of drama and performance) in appropriating Drew's image have increased rapidly. Once a "tabooed icon" of 9/11, the photograph is now on its way to become one of 9/11's most prominent emblems. Later on, I would like to explore this cultural tendency in a longer work.

#### **Publications Related to the Dissertation Project**

1. "Spectral Vestiges: Constructing the Ruins of the World Trade Center." *AMERICANA (E-Journal of the University of Szeged)* VII/1 (Spring 2011).
2. "Men on Wire: Performing 9/11." *The AnaChronisT* 15 (2010): 171-179.
3. "Working Through Ground Zero." Wilfried Raussert, et al. (eds.) *Remembering and Forgetting: Memory in Images and Texts*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2010, 115-136.
4. "Ikarosz Bábel romjainál." *Café Babel* 64 (2010): 23-31.